

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAMES VONDALE
FORD MOTOR COMPANY
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER AFFAIRS, FOREIGN COMMERCE
AND TOURISM, U.S. SENATE**

HEARING ON BOOSTER SEATS

April 24, 2001

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee. I am James Vondale, Director of Ford Motor Company's Automotive Safety Office. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss child safety and booster seats.

Over the past few decades, significant advances have been made in vehicle safety technology, and traffic fatality rates have declined steadily. Unfortunately, motor vehicle crashes remain the leading cause of death of children ages 5 to 14 in the U.S. Additionally, while injuries and fatalities involving infants and toddlers are down because of new developments in restraint technology, the wide availability of child safety seats, and aggressive education efforts, injuries and fatalities among children ages four to eight have declined only slightly. We are pleased with the progress that has been made to improve child passenger safety. But, Ford Motor Company is not satisfied and we continue to put motor vehicle safety, and particularly child safety, high on our agenda for continuing efforts for improvement.

Ford has worked for many years to increase proper restraint use by vehicle occupants of all ages. While our overall efforts will continue, we have increased our focus recently on the need to further improve the effectiveness of restraint systems for children. Ford

believes that booster seats should be used by children who have outgrown child safety seats but are too small to wear vehicle safety belts properly. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a child under 80 pounds is almost always too small physically to benefit as much from an adult safety belt alone as the child could benefit if better positioned by a booster seat. In a crash, poor belt fit can reduce the protection that the safety belts otherwise would provide against the risk of serious or fatal injuries. Booster seats help address that concern by raising the child in the seat, filling the size gap so the safety belts fit properly. Booster seats are also simple to use and can be moved easily among different vehicles. Unfortunately, available data indicates that only a small percentage of children between the ages of 4 and 8 are using booster seats.

Ford strongly supports the efforts of this Committee and other initiatives that can increase booster seat use. In fact, Ford believes booster seats and child safety are so important that we launched the Boost America! program in April of last year. Because of the importance and broad scope of this undertaking, we have partnered with a number of prominent safety minded organizations. Like all of our prior efforts to increase proper use of safety restraints, we believe education is critical to increasing booster seat use. A key component of our education strategy is the distribution of innovative, professionally developed educational materials to day care centers, pre-schools and elementary schools across the country. The Boost America! program has forwarded educational materials to more than 150,000 centers and schools. Boost America! has already sponsored more than 60 car seat inspection events in 13 states,

the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico and certified 317 new child passenger safety technicians during 20 certification courses in 7 states.

Additionally, the Boost America! program will distribute 1 million free booster seats nationwide. Half a million of the seats will be distributed to lower income families through United Way of America agencies around the country. The remaining half a million seats will be distributed by a voucher system through Ford Motor Company dealers and our partners. The vouchers will permit the remaining seats to be obtained at Toys R Us stores. I would like to submit additional information about the Boost America! program to the Committee for the record.

In conclusion, Ford Motor Company is a leading champion of child safety and booster seats. In fact, Ford was the first vehicle manufacturer to market a child restraint system in the U.S., beginning in 1957. Ford's Tot Guard child restraint was introduced in 1967 and sold by Ford and its dealers for many years until more modern child restraint systems became readily available in the marketplace. Ford's sponsorship of the Boost America! program demonstrates our firm commitment to dramatically increase the use of booster seats and we look forward to working together with you and others in the safety community on this important safety issue.